

About 15 million acre-feet of broomweed stand in wait to spew off pollens into the autumn air the minute frost hits this part of the shortgrass country. I am 30 days ahead of schedule on a big cedar dust jag.

Last week I coughed so hard, my right hearing aid exploded at a velocity fast enough to embed the blunt edge three inches deep in a feather pillow. One sneezing fit lasted so long, I knelt like a Tibetan monk to keep from splitting my ribcage.

Uncle Goat Whiskers the Elder prescribed burning chicken feather for all forms of distemper in man and beast. As a kid, his father ordered the cowboys to pile up feathers to form a smudge under their sick horses' heads, and Whiskers never experimented further. He, however, reserved a very fine French apricot brandy as his cold medicine of choice. Often his Christmas guests remained in convalescence up to Ground Hog Day from the aftermath of his potent cold remedy, nevertheless, once recovered, they were very appreciative of good health.

Scientists think allergies result from our bodies once building up immunities against contaminated waters and unrefrigerated foods, or that's what some schools of thought hold. After traveling to remote places like Borneo and New Guinea, and being subjected to such staggering convulsions of throat and stomach that fish bones lodged in my gullet

shook free, I think allergies are the sinuses trying to test the lungs' power to move substances heavier than air.

On the tenth day of this siege, I surrendered to a trip to Angelo to one of the dozen or so walk-in clinics in the city. I hate to go to San Angelo on a Sunday evening. Guys out shining their bass boats and their Ford pickups in the new parts of town look so happy on the driveways with their ever-loving wives bringing them cold beers and hot popcorn for snacks. Hardly a block in the old neighborhoods fails to bring back memories of a Christmas party or wedding reception years ago.

San Angelo changed to a modern city when I was looking off. Oh, everybody knows closing and tearing down the hotels ended the era of the rancher and the cowboys. But it must have been time, as nothing replaced the congenial hotels, the rowdy bars on Concho Street, or the vigorous dance halls out on the city limits.

The clinic had one man sitting in the waiting room. I didn't notice him until I sat down after the receptionist completed her interview. At a glance, I thought I recognized him. He looked like a rancher, and a pretty old one at that. If I lowered my magazine, he'd lower his, too. About the time I was ready to greet him, the nurse ordered me back in the examining room.

This misdirected Florence Nightingale set the scene. She and the doctor rated a full 10 for being impersonal, the code of the walk-ins. Three times, I mentioned I live on a

ranch 60 miles from town and can't run back and forth for treatments. Most San Angelo doctors respond to "ranch," as they normally buy one the second year they hit town, unless buying a ski lodge delays them 60 days.

Then it seeped through. These folks aren't like the old docs and nurses who used to patch us up from falls off horses and sew up the rips and tears of the trade, so we could go back to those miserable patches of ground that we can no more give up than pumping air through our lungs. Once the nurse might have been raised on a farm or a ranch. And the doctor. Half the staff of the hospitals shot doves at the dirt tanks at the old ranch and drank whiskey with the Big Boss after sundown.

The doctor's orders were to stay out of the dust and wait for the nurse to give me an injection. How doctors like him graduated from college without being able to read beats me. On the application under "reason for this visit," I wrote in plain English I had to work sheep the coming week and needed, at least, to start out feeling good the first few hours. Medical schools may not address the problem of sheep corrals, but any healer licensed to work in the shortgrass country should catch on that dust is involved in ranching before he completes 10 ear examinations.

I was really lonesome once the visit ended, but the sitting room was empty. When I turned from picking up my hat, I realized the old man was my reflection in a mirrored door and not another rancher at all. The knee bucking

coughing, aggravated by the wild flooding sinuses, had aged me so fast in the past two weeks that the doctor and his nurse must have thought I was joking about going to work ...